

Legal wrangling slows Stanford researcher's quest for a cure

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Joanna Wysocka/Stanford University

What does all the legal wrangling mean for stem cell scientists? Stanford published a profile of up-and-coming star Joanna Wysocka, who talks about her own NIH-funded research. Wysocka was awarded the Outstanding Young Investigator Award at the annual meeting of the International Society for Stem Cell Research in June and has both a SEED and a New Faculty award from CIRM. In her acceptance speech for the ISSCR award Wysocka credited her SEED award for pulling her into the field of stem cell research.

Amidst her other successes, Wysocka also received the highest of scores on an NIH grant proposal that would fund stem cell research with the promise to help children with a rare developmental disorder known as CHARGE syndrome, which leads to life-threatening complications.

That award is one of the ones that got held up in the Aug. 23 ruling that threw NIH funding of human embryonic stem cell research into a tailspin. The Stanford story says:

“ “I am currently funding this project largely from leftovers of my start-up funds and relatively unrestricted junior investigator awards, but we need more money to continue,” she said. While the latest ruling means that the NIH can fund grants like hers, there is uncertainty among researchers nationwide due to the unsettled state of the law.

As of September 9, the NIH can once again proceed with funding human embryonic stem cell grants, but that funding is far from settled. That uncertainty could lead to significant delays.

“ Although the NIH now can move forward on her grant, she's not sure how fast it can act - and whether the next court ruling could deal another setback before that happens. She noted that the NIH committee that must give final approval for her funding met while Lamberth's ruling was in effect, so it did not consider her grant. That committee meets only three times a year, she said, so now she may have to wait.

"The review process was disrupted - it's not something that can change in a day," she said. "I have no clue when my grant will get back on track."

The stem cell researchers and people employed in their labs are disrupted by the legal back and forth, but what's worse is the uncertainty for families of children with CHARGE syndrome who look to work like Wysocka's with hope.

A.A.

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